PROBLEM BASED LEARNING AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

Amira Sariyati Firdaus
University of Malaya

Prologues

This paper discusses the Reggio-Emila Approach in early childhood education. A Reggio-inspired kindergarten in Kuala Lumpur provided an observable example of this approach in Malaysia. The researcher was granted permission to unobtrusively observe a half-day school session, and to conduct an intensive interview with the school principal. A request to interview students and teachers was denied, as was a request to conduct a focus-group discussion. This paper discusses the Reggio Emilia philosohphy, followed by Reggio Emilia's Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach. A summary of this researcher's observation and findings are presented. The conclusion discusses the feasibility of the Reggio Emilia Approach in early childhood education.

Introduction

A common central thesis of early childhood education and Problem Based Learning (PBL) is the building of strong physical, emotional and mental foundations by encouraging initiativeness, self-motivation, social competence and critical thinking (Kingham 2004 and Chapman 2002). The greater vision is to help children acquire important skills to become competent problem solvers and good navigators of life's varied problems and challenges.

The Reggio Emilia (RE) approach is an embodiment of PBL in early childhood education. Through project work, peer collaboration, social intimacy, assuming responsibility, and self-documentation of their own learning process, children are given the facility to co-construct and negotiate knowledge, which ultimately belong to them, and henceforth becomes more accessible, better retained and better utilized by the child (Cockrell et al. 2000).

Originating from the Reggio Emilia region in Italy, this problem based learning perspective has been well received elsewhere as well. However, Italian practitioners caution that the Reggio Emilia Approach isn't an easily replicable model. Rather, it is an *example* of diligent research on the learning system most suitable to the particular community and culture, with great consideration for the particular society's world view, values, and norms. Reggio Emilia inspired schools around the world maintain association through constant dialogue, sharing of experiences and exchanged visits.

The Reggio Emila Approach

Theoretical foundations of the reggio-emila approach

The foundational philosophy of the Reggio Emila Approach lays in the premise that "knowledge is a co-constructed and socially negotiated commodity, which occurs within a historical, cultural and political context" (ibid). Thus the education of a child recognizes no spatial, temporal or even cognitive boundaries. Education is a holistic endeavor of developing every aspect of a child; mind, body, emotion and social competence. Collectively and individually, every object, person and situation can be a potential learning opportunity. To stay true to such a philosophical foundation, the Reggio Emilia Approach itself emphasizes openness to new knowledge on education. Two defining characteristic of the Reggio Emila Approach are that 1) it is principally founded upon continued research in both its own practices and other educational approaches, and 2) it emphasizes the role of a child's cultural, social and physical environment in the development of an educational curriculum.

Among the many scholars and disciplinary fields that have contributed to various embodiments of the RE philosophy, perhaps the most influential are Bruno Ciari, John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vigotsky. (Cimino & Kuiper 2002)

Lev Vygotsky stresses that learning occurs through interaction between adults and children. Adults, as more skillful partners in the learning venture, provide social guidance and modeling to children fostering development of both their cognitive and social processes. In slight modification, the RE philosophy asserts that children in possession of skills that others do not have also have the potential to contribute to the learning process by provoking questions and interpretations among themselves and among adults around them.

Certain elements of Jean Piaget's perspective on child cognitive development, namely his constructive outlook on cognitive conflicts, are reflective of RE philosophy. Piaget saw ideational and cognitive conflicts as building a higher order of thought, and a foundation for learning within social settings. Similarly, the RE Approach views error and conflict not as measures of development, but as opportunities for furthering the learning process.

John Dewey's philosophy of 'progressive education' sees mutuality in learning where both teachers and students interact and cooperate in the educational process. Dewey's constructionist position emphasized the role of thought and social interaction in the development of the learning process. Experience and investigation formed the core of the learning process. Thus Dewey placed emphasis on project based curriculum where the learning process was characterized as continual "reorganization, reconstruction and transformation of understandings"(ibid).

Bruno Ciari was perhaps the most influential person in the development of an interactionist education system in the Municipality of Reggio Emila in Italy. From the early 1950's, Ciari vigorously campaigned for an education system that would promote the development of the whole child. He pressed for greater community-involvement in

education, where parents, teachers, and other citizens engage in open dialogue on all aspects of education. Among his proposals include having two teachers for each class, that each class has not more than twenty students, and that the physical environment of the school be harnessed as a third teacher. He also advanced the notion of all teachers and staff working collectively without hierarchy.(ibid)

As mentioned earlier, along with constant reflection on various theories of education, the RE Approach also considers the existing cultural, social, economical and physical environment of the child as important elements of an education system. With such guiding principals, each Reggio Emila inspired school is distinct and different from the other. This distinction can be seen in many aspects; social norms, values, spatial organization, projects undertaken, activities, and even materials used. (Kingham 2004) Nevertheless, it is the same basic principals of the Reggio Emilia philosophy that inspire these differences; interaction among students, teachers as well as the immediate and the external environment shape each school's distinct educational approach.

Problem Based Learning And The Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio-Emila approach to early childhood education subscribes to the philosophy that children are active and eager learners. Besides mastering disciplinary knowledge bases and skills, students also develop competence in critical thinking and are skilled at problem solving strategies. Teachers present students with topics of exploration, and allow the students to creatively explore the topics, to determine what will be explored, and how.

Roles of the teacher, students as active learners and an emergent curriculum

In line with Problem Based Learning approaches, the Reggio Emilia Approach to education conceptualizes the teacher as playing multiple and overlapping roles. Teachers work alongside their other teachers as co-teachers. The teacher is also a co-learner, working alongside his students and developing his own skills and knowledge. The teacher's role as facilitator requires him to provide students with relevant resources for learning, including but not limited to pedagogy, projects ideas, practical strategies, documentation and even co-construction.

The teacher is ever-aware that in designing the spatial organization, initial learning materials, and potential topics for exploration, he is not necessarily structuring a curriculum that must be adhered to. Rather, the curriculum, which encompasses all the mentioned components among others, will be further developed as the school session unfolds. Student's interests in particular topics, their response to the immediate and external environments and their competency in various skills, as well as their constant interaction among themselves and with teachers, help to shape the activities and projects that make up their learning curriculum. This emergent curriculum is intended to provide multiple learning opportunities where students not only learn facts and skills, but are also encouraged to be inquisitive and explorative.

Project Work

As opposed to approaching disciplinary subjects out of context, project work facilitates the learning of subject matter as well as related skills. The teacher may initiate a project, provide initial resources to problem solving and then act as a facilitator as students explore and experiment with problem solving strategies. The goal of project work is to learn about the subject matter through whatever means feasible, and within the context of this learning process, students are also exposed to essential skills useful in other projects, and perhaps other aspects of life in general. Project work democratizes knowledge and puts it in the hands of the student. Knowledge gained through self exploration is better appreciated and highly rewarding as it gives the student a sense of ownership and mastery.

Collaboration

Emphasis is placed upon collaborative relationships in the Reggio Emilia setting. Several levels of relationships mark the Reggio Emilia setting. Firstly, students are encouraged to undertake group projects where collaboration of tasks and ideas require interpersonal interaction among group members, inclusive of teachers. Secondly, the social structure of the Reggio school resembles that of a closely-knit extended family. Interpersonal interactions are informal and intimate. And all individuals participate in learning as well as housekeeping activities. In this sense, collaboration the Reggio way is not simply about aggregating individual efforts in the pursuit of defined goals, but encompasses the creation and maintenance of close relationships.

Documentation

The Reggio Emila approach stresses documentation of the learning process as part of the learning process itself. Various media, including students' work, are utilized to record and represent students' thoughts, feelings, observations and even memories. Documentation reflects the efforts and emotions harnessed into projects and activities. On a more pragmatic level, documentation makes displaying of projects more concerted and organized, and allows parents, teachers and other students to view and appreciate completed projects. On a similar note, it also facilitates the tracking of progress and development, enabling teachers and parents to guide and inspire students further. Students themselves may find opportunities for learning within the documentation process or the document artifacts. Furthermore, the process of documentation can be viewed as an archive of a school's history and its students' learning experiences.

The Physical Environment As A Third Teacher

Much thought is put into designing the physical environment in the Reggio Emilia Approach. Much effort is made ensure that furniture, equipment, materials and activities are accessible to students with minimum or no teacher (or adult) assistance. Corners and wall are utilized for display of students work, and other documentation. Spatial organization must allow maximum movement, interdependence, and interaction. Much like the family-like social structure of the school, the physical environment is also

informal, amiable, comfortable and safe, as a family home might be. It must also provide as many learning opportunities as possible. Just as teachers play multiple roles, so does the physical environment. It simultaneously acts as a buffer to, and as an extension of, the school's external environment. It *houses* projects, learning materials, and activities, and it can also *be* a project, activity or learning material. In addition, spatial organization evolves and changes when need, opportunity or even initiative, presents itself.

Reggio-Sunbeam Kindergarten: The Reggio-Emila Approach Within A Malaysian Context

Reggio-Sunbeam Kindergarten in Bangsar, created in 2001, subscribes to the Reggio-Emila approach in early childhood education.

Reggio-Sunbeam was conceived when the management of the then not-yet-established school learned about the Reggio Emilia philosophy in Australia and the United Kingdom, and subsequently visited the Reggio Emilia municipal schools in Italy. Reggio-Sunbeam's adoption the RE Approach is fostered through open dialogue, and keeping in touch with other RE-inspired schools around the world. Other than this relationship of sharing information and experiences, there is little that ties one RE school to another.

The children at Reggio Sunbeam Kindergarten are in between the ages of two and six. The 80 students are grouped into classes of not more than ten students of the same age group. Teachers are called 'Aunties', and each group is referred to as particular Aunty's 'children'. Children come from diverse ethnic, spiritual and cultural backgrounds and countries, but are all from affluent families. Teachers are multi-racial, and presumably come from urban and middle and upper-middle class backgrounds.

A PBL approach to education is evident in nearly every aspect of Sunbeam. The spatial organization of the school, the role of the teacher, and the curriculum are all 'designed' to be flexible, and to create 'learning opportunities' in which the children actively participate in learning.

Physical Environment

Sunbeam is housed in a three-and-a-half story banglow with a front yard, and a backyard, both equipped, but not crammed, with durable-plastic playground equipment. The interior of the house is made up of mainly open spaces.

It was interesting to note that unlike in traditional schools, Sunbeam did not have a blackboard / whiteboard. Chairs and tables were also missing in most areas. There was a concentration of chairs and tables in the kitchen and dining area, but few or none in other rooms and spaces. As a matter of fact, children can be seen doing their work on the floor using raised bed-trays in place of desks.

There are also no computers, and no television set. There is, however, a radio, which was utilized by the Mandarin Aunty in her 'class' to play children's songs. 'Classes' are held in various rooms and open areas around the house, with groups shifting spaces every 30 to 50 minutes.

Role Of The Teacher

There is a ratio of at least one teacher to every ten children in Sunbeam. Toddler groups usually have two teachers, while older groups have one teacher. Teachers are all called 'Aunty'. In discussing her teaching staff, the Principal refers to them as 'all the Aunties', and stresses the Aunties' roles as facilitators and co-learners who actively participate in the children's activities. They are not simply disseminators of knowledge. This author finds the term 'Aunty' appropriate and reflective of their interaction with 'their children'. It is almost as if children are in the care of a family member who enjoys their company. Children are often gently reminded to be thoughtful of each other, hugs and kisses are exchanged when some children are feeling down, and Aunties more often than not join the children in their banter and their activities.

Atmosphere And Dressing

The atmosphere in Sunbeam is reflective of the RE approach of creating a school environment that is modeled after the home. Spatial organization allows for much free movement and ease of interaction and activities among children and Aunties.

The atmosphere at Sunbeam is very jovial. Although Aunties encourage their children to join the group activities, children are not strictly prohibited from wandering from their group. Although free movement is allowed within the school, Aunties generally make efforts to minimize distraction, such as closing classroom doors, or even asking a child if he wouldn't prefer to join the activity of his own group. On the whole, it is rare that a child wanders away from his group, although it is not unusual for one or two children in any given group to disengage from group activities and do their own thing. Two of the toddlers were seen to cling certain Aunties and are literally cuddled and carried around the entire school day. One child was undergoing a stressful time at home. The Aunty in question wanted to give a feeling of security and to boost her confidence level, and so did not want to push her to join her group just yet. While giving the child the intimacy and security she needed, the Aunty still interacted with other children.

All the Aunties dress casually, and wear an orange 'Sunbeam' smock over their clothes. The children are all given uniforms, but the parents are told that "it is up to them" whether or not to wear the uniforms. Most of the students wear their uniforms. Shoes are left at the door in shoe racks under long benches, and everyone goes barefoot inside, very much like in any typical Malaysian home.

Children are encouraged to be concerned for other people's feelings and welfare. Aunties are encouraged to be firm but kind.

Curriculum – Emergent Vs. Planned

Sunbeam's aim is to "nurture healthy, confident and creative children … (to) lay the foundations of great adults … (with the aid of) the right environment, tools and guidance" (Sunmbeam 2004). The emergent curriculum and its project based learning, coupled with an environment that presents multiple opportunities for learning are all designed with the goal of giving children strong holistic foundations.

While Sunbeam meets the Malaysian Ministry of Education's preschool syllabus, stressing the 3R's in Bahasa Malaysia and English, science, mathematics and moral, it does so in a less structured way. The school outlines a flexible curriculum in which it aims to develop various aspects of the child. The curriculum for 2 to 3 ½ year olds encompass self development, social development, creative development, physical development, communication / language development, and early logic development. The curriculum for 3½ to six year olds encompass English / Bahasa Malaysia / communication, mathematics, science, living skills, sensory development, creative development, moral, history and geography / culture. (Detailed objectives, skills and sub-topics of the two curriculums as well as the corresponding daily schedule are appendixed at the end of this paper)

Aunties confer on a daily basis to discuss their children's activities and developments, and to sketch a rough outline of the next day's aims. However, what activities are actually done may differ substantially from the Aunty's rough proposal.

It must also be noted that although the general syllabus is categorized by age groups and into subject matter, the holistic approach that Sunbeam takes ensures that overlaps occur in all areas. Subjects are explored in a way that relates to other subjects, and children are not confined to learning only the subjects and skills of their age groups. Similarly, children and Aunties take hold of any opportunity for learning, even those not mentioned by the syllabus.

Basically, the child, through his explorations, his interest, and his own initiative shapes his own individual curriculum. At the same time, interaction with other children, with Aunties and with his physical environment provides learning opportunities that can spark interest and present challenges. Collaboration on group projects and activities facilitate learning and exploration.

Projects

Projects are the core of learning at Sunbeam. Aunties would generally introduce topics by talking about it, and encouraging the children to join in conversation. As they speak, Aunties would initiate an activity related to the topic. The subject matter would then be used in numerous activities with the objectives of 1) learning more about the topic, and 2) learning skills and subject matter. The skills include, but are not limited to those mentioned in the curriculum.

The extent and variety of activities and skills involved vary between age groups and between individual children. Projects may last one school term (six months), or furthered the next term. The subtopics of a subject matter, and the activities involved, are often initiated by the children themselves, while Aunties guide the activities so that children are exposed to skills and subjects previously mentioned.

Specific project activities are combinations of structured and unstructured activities, and combinations of independent and collaborative work. While other group members engage in unstructured group or independent activities, each child is given a turn for one-on-one coaching from the group's Aunty. Examples of such structured activity include learning the ABC's, completing worksheet exercises, and painting straight lines. Some of the work from sessions are either a child's individual contribution to the group project, or are derived from the theme of the project.

Resources for learning and exploring are also a combination of structured and unstructured materials. While exercise worksheets, educational toys, flashcards and other pre-packaged teaching materials are utilized, a quick scan of the school hints that unstructured materials make up the bulk of the children's learning materials. Books, art equipment, play-doh, things from nature, everyday objects like clothes and foodstuffs are just some examples of the materials that children use creatively.

A project done last year on 'Transportation' illustrates Sunbeam's commitment to encouraging creativity, group collaboration and problem solving among the children. At the beginning of the term, each group's Aunty introduced the topic in a way that she felt best. Certain activities, such as drawing vehicles, were done by all groups. However, in general, each group went on to explore the topic in a different way. One group became fascinated with trains, and worked on a 3-dimensional model of a train, complete with tracks and surrounding terrain. Another group focused on air travel, and created a poster of the things involved with traveling by air, such as buying tickets and boarding the airplane. Another group did a collage of cars that their parents drive. Another group focused on fire engines and created a life-size pin-up of a fireman.

These projects are then put up for display throughout the school, on walls, and in corners. In that way, children are able to see the results of their group work, and are able to share the projects with members of other groups and their parents. The displaying of projects is also part of documentation, which is an integral element of the RE philosophy.

Besides subtopics and activities of projects introduced by the school, students also sometimes initiate entirely new projects and activities. One such example is dry-leaf painting, which was initiated by a child who stumbled upon a basket of dry leaves. One group also learned about frogs when a small frog was found in the school. The frog was kept safe during the duration of one class, and then brought out to the playground where it was released. This group's Aunty engaged the students in conversation about frogs living outdoors.

Documentation

Documentation is done for display purposes, and so that the child's growth and development can be followed (as opposed to report cards and teacher evaluations as a way of following a child's development). Simple documentation of children's work is done "for all to realize what's happening" (Kingham 2004).

In line with Sunbeam's approach of flexibility, no specific format for documentation was observed. A short comment made by the child will be written on each piece of individual work. Aunties transcribe the comments of children not yet able to write, and children who are able to write, write the comments themselves. For group projects and individual work displayed together, Aunties write a short summary of how they introduced project, the activities involved, as well as their observations of the children's skills and awareness about the subject.

Each child has folder in which the curriculum, and daily schedule of his group is kept together with his work (which includes his and his Aunty's short comments). The folders are taken out each day, so that children can immediately file their work. The children are free to look at their own folders at any time.

Life Skills

Sunbeam's spatial organization, routine activities, and even learning activities mirror PBL and RE commitments to developing the child's ability to face real life situations and problems. This is reflected in its physical environment, in daily routine activities, as well as in learning activities.

Spatial Organization

Bathrooms are not specially equipped with child-size amenities, and staircases and cooking areas are not gated. This aspect of spatial organization is not an oversight but consciously planned. The purpose, in line with PBL philosophy of providing students with life skills, is so that children acquire the skills needed for maneuvering themselves in an adult oriented physical world such as physical agility and a sense of safety and caution.

Routine Activities

Children are somewhat heavily involved in the general upkeep of the school, and themselves. While meals are wholly prepared by staff, children, especially older ones, play a part in setting the table, and taking used cups and dishes to the kitchen sink. Children are also expected to take out and pack away whatever drinks or food that they may bring from home.

Children are also assigned simple housekeeping duties such as wiping the table and sweeping the floor. A hand made time table is put up on the wall to remind children of their duties and turns.

Housekeeping is also done on a constant basis, in the sense that children pack away materials after use. Aunties engage the children in tidying up, and often collaborate with them to put things away. Similarly, children are also involved in the setting of materials or activities.

Children are also trained to independently use the bathroom. Children who stay beyond lunch time have their afternoon baths in the school, and are encouraged to undress, bath and dress on their own. However, all children are supervised at bath time and younger children are helped. It is interesting that bath time is not viewed merely viewed as a routine activity, but one in which play and interaction are consciously allowed in the hope that children will learn how to look after themselves and bond (as is the case throughout the day as well).

Issues

While on the whole RE and PBL approaches to education are evident in the activities, norms and environment of the school, certain issues call for introspection.

Intimate Relationships and Dialogue with Families and Larger Community

Sunbeam advocates the maintenance of intimate relationships within the school and between families and staff. However, certain phenomena indicate a lack of commitment to this philosophy.

Firstly, this researcher was not granted permission to interview children and teachers as the management did not want them to be distracted. A fair enough reason. However, the researcher was also denied a focus-group discussion with teachers, and this was somewhat perplexing as it was not reflective of the RE philosophy of dialogue and openness with the community at large. On the same note, although this researcher's visit was pre-arranged, and there were less than ten Aunties in the school, a number of them did not seem to know what this researcher was doing at Sunbeam, which was rather surprising. This may have been an oversight on the part of the principal, as she did introduce this researcher to certain Aunties while they were not engaged with their children.

Secondly, Aunties and their children's families generally do not maintain relationships outside of the school. This is understandable considering the urban setting of Sunbeam. Although this researcher did not press the reasons for this lack of outside-school interaction, presumably there may be two reasons for it. Firstly, many parents are busy career people, and do not have the time to socialize outside of their work, family and neighborhood groups. Secondly, and alternately, the school's steep fees (averaging RM510 per month for each child) indicate that parents are of the upper middle and upper income groups, with around half of them expatriates. Thus socio-economic class factors may play a role in limiting friendships among Aunties and parents.

Preparing Older Children for Government Primary School

Sunbeam Aunties and administrators and fully aware there many of the local children will enter government primary schools upon leaving Sunbeam, and so make efforts to prepare for the primary school syllabus. While this researcher was concerned about the children's reaction to entering a much more structured and rigid school environment, as compared to Sunbeam, the Principal felt that as Sunbeam has already built strong foundations in terms of self-confidence and inquisitiveness, there shouldn't be any issues of adjustment. Furthermore, Sunbeam obtained Ministry of Education approval because it covered the Ministry's pre-school syllabus, so children are also academically well prepared.

However, an Aunty with several years of experience teaching in other 'elite' kindergartens, and who had school-age children shared this researcher's concerns. This Aunty, who joined Sunbeam two months earlier, seemed unhappy about the heavy syllabus in government primary schools. She indicated that she preferred a system like Sunbeam, but would personally not send her own children to Sunbeam for fear they may not be able to adjust in a more structured and demanding school system.

Individual Embracement of Re Philosophy

Sunbeam Aunties are hired on the basis of their appreciation for the Reggio Emilia philosophy, their commitment to nurturing and educating young children, and their general attitudes towards others and the environment. All Aunties are given training in the sense that they are exposed to RE philosophy and approach. However, in line RE philosophy of learning as a negotiated and socially-constructed process, Aunties are not pressed to follow any specific teaching styles.

Thus different Aunties interact with, collaborate with and guide their children in a different ways. On the whole, most Aunties engage their children in conversation and inquiry. However, it was observed that some newer Aunties seemed to follow more traditional molds of 'teacher'.

Instead of encouraging her children to be independent, the Aunty of group of older children cut out pictures of fish that her children had drawn and colored. Another Aunty, after reading *The Little Red Riding Hood* proceeded to talk about dangers of trusting strangers. Instead of engaging her children in conversation, and getting their opinions and assessing their comprehension, this Aunty simply *told* her children that it was dangerous to trust strangers. The children were given no avenue to respond or make comments.

Although this researcher failed to mention these incidents to the principal, she did mention that Aunties were encouraged to find the interaction style that suit them and their children best. At the same time, new Aunties, through their interaction with longer-tenured Aunties, were exposed to ways that best reflected the Reggio Emila philosophy. This, in a way, reflected the egalitarian nature of the school, as collaborative learning and development is not made available to just the children, but is extended to staff as well.

Issues of Adopting the Reggio-Emilia Approach

For ready-established schools adopting the RE philosophy, it is a difficult transformation and restructuring process. Some examples can be taken from the RE-inspired schools in United States (US) and Australia.

While RE practitioners, and the general American educational system converge on the value of inquiry-based learning, a child-centered curriculum, and collaborative construction (Hendrick 1997 in Cimino & Kuiper 2002), societal norms and influence, and education structures in the US posed constraints upon adoption of the approach. For one, traditional American society view early childhood education as a platform to build "readiness in basic literacy and numeracy skills" (Cimino & Kuiper 2002), and very little attention to the child's social relations. Italian culture, on the other hand, value social relations, and see early childhood as a time to foster interpersonal and community relationships. Adoption of the RE philosophy required a change in outlook.

Educators trying to implement the RE Approach in their schools found issues with "approaching old activities in new ways; planning for emergent curriculum; reconsidering time; persevering in collaboration; and involving parents" (ibid). The American school, based upon a structured physical environment (i.e walled class rooms that with set furniture), structured teaching (pre-planned syllabus that must be covered) and specific targets (advancing into the next pre-determined level) make it difficult to espouse the unstructured approach advanced by RE enthusiasts. The adoption of RE philosophy in Australia also surfaced similar concerns. Adopting the RE Approach means abandoning tried and tested methods and "embracing uncertainty" (ibid).

The most feasible way of acculturating teachers, students, school boards, and parents to the RE way, is to take adopt those aspects that are culturally similar to each school's surrounding community, and to make changes in phases. However, this also posed problems in terms of disruption. Building renovation to create more open spaces obviously imposed physical discomfort upon students and teachers. In addition, the changing of curriculum thwarted some syllabus and introduced confusion as to uncompleted targeted goals.

The easiest place to begin is obviously early childhood education, and a new school. This is may be how the RE approach in Sunbeam has succeeded with few problems.

The Reggio-Sunbeam Kindergarten in Malaysia was no more a difficult project than the opening of other privately-owned foreign inspired kindergartens. This may be due to the fact that the Sunbeam was a new school inspired from the RE philosophy from the very beginning of its inception. In that sense, apart from training teaching staff, there were very little adaptation or transformation issues to consider.

Conclusion

Within the context of an urban, affluent and cosmopolitan community in Kuala Lumpur, Reggio-Sunbeam Kindergarten puts into practice the Reggio Emilia philosophy of holistic development of the child. The children's similar socio-economic environments, and their diverse ethnic, spiritual and cultural backgrounds, are all harnessed in the negotiation of the curriculum, physical organization, and values and norms of Sunbeam.

Problem Based Learning and the holistic approach to child development is evident at Sunbeam. However, the implication of their Sunbeam experience on the children's later life, specifically life in government primary schools, has yet to be explored.

It is in this author's personal opinion that the Reggio-Emilia Approach can be beneficial to Malaysian society at large if adopted by the Ministry of Education. However, this study takes a very cultural history perspective in exploring the Reggio-Emilia Approach in Malaysia. Critical reflection of the approach has not been done, and neither has the approach been grounded in empirical analysis. Indeed, literature on Reggio Emila philosophy and approach, are mainly based on practitioner experience, with hardly any in the form of true research. Future inquiry should make efforts to address such inadequacies.

The Reggio-Emilia Approach does not stop at early childhood education, and is relevant to all other stages of education and development as well. It provides a strong philosophical foundation for exploring Problem Based Learning, and would be useful if reflected upon in when discussing and searching for PBL rationale and strategies.

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